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An Agenda for Research and Development on Rural Education

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Preface

Schools in small towns and throughout rural America serve more than one-third of the Nation's students. Unfortunately, many of these schools face and will continue to face unique and lingering challenges as we head into the next century.

Inadequate income and a lack of economic development within many nonmetropolitan counties are well documented. Problems caused by poverty are often compounded by sparse settlement and isolation, severely limiting student access to learning resources, cultural enrichment, and even basic services. Yet many rural schools often enjoy certain advantages, such as strong community involvement, individual attention to students, and flexible scheduling that are well worth nurturing and emulating.

Beyond these general observations, relatively little research has been completed on rural schools, their students and teachers, or their learning environments. The Federal Interagency Committee on Education (FICE) recognized a need to better examine the state of rural education and attempted to identify and articulate some of the research issues.

The committee's analysis identified six priority topics that represent the most compelling concerns. The topics cover school effectiveness; curriculum provisions; school-community partnerships; human resources; use of technology; and finance and governance issues.

By publishing an agenda for research concerning rural education, the U.S. Department of Education reaffirms its interest in:

- ❒ Opening a channel for dialogue on the problems and contributions of rural education;
- ❒ Encouraging the focus of research and development resources on rural concerns; and
- ❒ Promoting coordination and collaboration among researchers.

We encourage researchers to share their findings with the U.S. Department of Education's Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC). This will enable all rural educators and the organizations that serve them to learn of progress made on key research questions. Our goal is to help rural America continually upgrade educational opportunities for its students of all ages. But we also seek to provide a research foundation for perceived successes in rural classrooms that can be shared nationally.

As research progresses, we will need to adapt this agenda to changing conditions. We invite your comments—now and in the future. In the meantime, we hope this booklet will serve to stimulate interest in rural education, an area that directly affects the lives of so many of our Nation's children.

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Introduction

Education is central to the quality of life. It is at the very heart of our country's economic strength and our national vitality. Nowhere is that linkage more apparent than in rural America. Here, distance, terrain, low population density, and scarce assets often limit both educational and economic opportunities. At the same time, many rural teachers and administrators have effectively drawn upon community strengths to deliver an education second to none.

In 1989, President Bush and the Nation's governors met to formulate national education goals to be achieved by the year 2000. Essential for attaining these goals is the use of research to help promote learning and to identify and remove barriers to student access and achievement. Students in rural America face the same challenges as their peers nationwide, but the challenges are compounded by issues and circumstances unique to the variety of rural settings. Thus it is crucial that we include rural education among our research concerns.

Wherever they may live, both our young people in school and adults seeking continuing education must face the 21st century equipped with the knowledge and skills necessary to participate in every aspect of our Nation's life. Armed with the understanding that research yields, teachers can better provide students with the tools needed to tap their own potential and to make the best of each opportunity.

Our Nation's future depends on it.

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The six priority topics that follow include sample research questions.

1

The Effectiveness of Rural Schools

Researchers should clearly define the factors that describe and affect the rural community being studied, such as geographic isolation; economy of scale; and variability in culture, economy, and social environment.

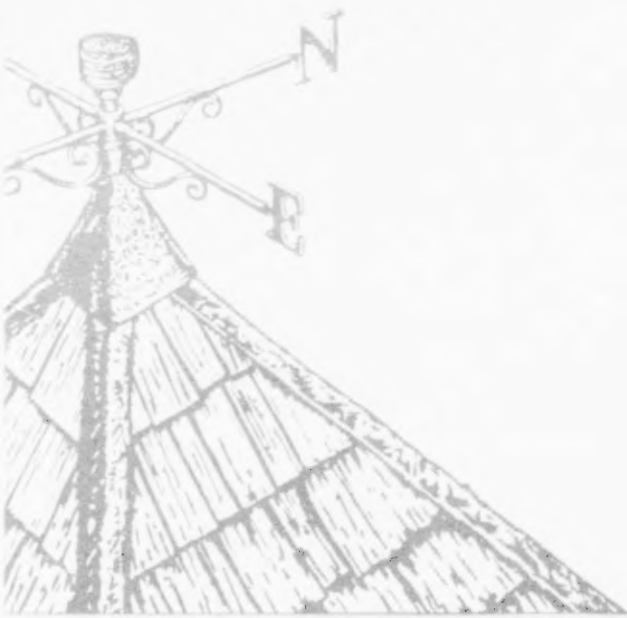
- ❒ Do students in rural communities have access to effective schooling in terms of quality (e.g., good physical environment, laboratories and supplies for learning, and well-qualified teachers) and diversity of courses?
- ❒ Since most research on effective schools has focused on urban settings, could anything be learned by differentiating between urban and rural settings using data from previous studies? Can comparable studies be conducted in rural settings?
- ❒ What practices have been successful in surmounting perceived service delivery barriers?
- ❒ What problems are unique to the delivery of education services to the handicapped in isolated rural communities, and how are such problems best solved?

2

Curricular Provisions in Rural Schools

Serious curricular concerns have been raised over needs assessment, individualized instruction, design and implementation, cooperation with private sector development, access, and adult literacy improvement.

- ❒ How, and with what results, have rural schools balanced state mandates, special local imperatives, and special individual student needs in the assessment of need and curricular decision making?
- ❒ How does the school's role of promoting employability differ from its role in promoting community economic development? Is there, or should there be, a balance between the two roles?



3

School and Community Partnerships

Research on school and community relationships should describe the environment within which learning occurs.

- ❒ What impacts do various local organizations (e.g., parent teacher associations and others) have on broader school and community relationships?
- ❒ How do the factors of community economy and ethos influence students' decisions to remain in school and graduate?
- ❒ Do Native American communities, or their learning environments, differ from other rural communities or from each other? What implications do these differences have for effective schooling?

4

Human Resources for Rural Schools

Research on rural school personnel should be focused on recruitment, retention, professional development, administration, and supervision.

- ❒ What strategies have been successful in helping rural schools compete favorably with urban schools to hire and retain good teachers?
- ❒ How do administrators help good rural teachers maintain their effectiveness? For example, what strategies have been most successful for releasing rural teachers from their classrooms for professional development?
- ❒ What has been the impact of recent state certification mandates on teacher availability in rural schools compared with urban schools? What strategies are being used to comply with the mandates and with what results?

5

Use of Technology in Rural Schools

The learning outcomes achieved from each new technological advance need to be studied— individually and comparatively.

- ❒ Do student success levels vary when identical curriculum is delivered through specialized courses via television, computer, or interactive video (distance learning) versus more traditional classroom and teacher-learner interactions? Does success vary in relation to such human and sociological factors as age, culture, ethnicity, or learning style? What effects do advanced technologies and distance learning have on traditional rural values of closeness, connection, or personal relationships in learning interactions? What are the implications for instructional staff, support personnel, and for staff development?

- ❒ What does it take to create the most hospitable environment for the implementation of advanced technology? What decision-making processes work best when rural schools and businesses join to achieve cost-effectiveness in the implementation and use of new technologies?

- ❒ What staff development strategies have been most successful in helping schools, teachers, and support personnel embrace and integrate advanced technologies into their overall systems?

6

Financial Support and Governance for Rural Schools

Research should focus on the effects of school aid financial distribution formulas used by the states and by the federal government, the impact of school consolidation, and issues of education standards and quality.

- ❒ How have federal and state fund distribution formulas impacted rural schools in their operations and course offerings? Has rural school and school district consolidation achieved its intended goals? Have intermediate governance and service delivery structures played a part in achieving equity for schools and learners in rural settings?
- ❒ Are rural schools receiving an equitable share of federal formula funds, research and development support, incentives for innovation and cooperative ventures, and awards for pilot and demonstration programs?
- ❒ What has been the impact on rural schools of state school reform policies on course quality, diversity of course offerings, and student outcomes?
- ❒ What have been the most successful strategies for having states address rural problems, and for developing local leadership?

To Comment on the Agenda

Inquiries and suggestions about this agenda should be directed to

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To Submit Research

Researchers are invited to submit their research manuscripts directly to
ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools (ERIC/CRESS)
Acquisition Department
P.O. Box 1348
Charleston, WV 25325.
For further information, call
1–800–624–9120.

To Access Research Information

For information on existing rural education research, contact the ERIC system's dissemination arm, ACCESS ERIC, by calling 1–800–USE–ERIC.

NOTES

This Agenda for Research and Development on Rural Education is being disseminated through the collaborative efforts of:

- ❒ The Office of Vocational and Adult Education, charged with coordinating rural education-related activities and programs of federal departments and agencies;
- ❒ The Office of Educational Research and Improvement, responsible for supporting education research and disseminating information and knowledge from research and successful practice in order to improve learning; and
- ❒ The Office of Intergovernmental and Interagency Affairs, responsible for the operations of the Federal Interagency Committee on Education.

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In 1989, the FICE Subcommittee on Rural Education examined the state of rural education research, drawing upon the knowledge of specialists within the federal government, including among many others, those in the U.S. Departments of Education, Agriculture, Commerce, Interior, and Labor, and the Appalachian Regional Commission. The many nonfederal experts involved included rural program coordinators in the Department of Education-funded regional educational laboratories, and researchers and practitioners in organizations such as the National Rural Education Association. This publication is a result of their concern and dedicated efforts.

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